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THE BUXTON SETTLEMENT IN CANADA

The Buxton, or Elgin Association Settlement, in Kent county, western Ontario, was in many respects the most important attempt made before the Civil War to found a Negro refugee colony in Canada. In population, material wealth and general organization it was outstanding, and the firm foundation upon which it was established is shown by the fact that today, more than half a century after emancipation, it is still a prosperous and distinctly Negro settlement.

The western peninsula of Ontario, lying between Lakes Huron and Erie, was long the Mecca of the fugitive slave. Bounded on the east by the State of New York, on the west by Michigan, and on the south by Ohio and northwestern Pennsylvania, this was the part of Canada most easily reached by the fugitive; and Niagara, Cleveland, Detroit and other lake ports saw thousands of refugees cross narrow strips of water to "shake the lion's paw" and find freedom in the British queen's dominions. During the forties and fifties there was a constant stream of refugees into Canada. As many as thirty in a day would cross the Detroit River at Fort Malden alone. Many of these went to the cities and towns, but others found greater happiness in the separate Negro communities which grew up here and there.

The history of the Buxton settlement, one of these, is closely linked with the name of Rev. William King. King was a native of Londonderry, Ireland, a graduate of Glasgow College, who had emigrated to the United States and become rector of a college in Louisiana. Later he returned to Scotland, studied theology in the Free Church College, Edinburgh, and in 1846 was sent out to Canada as a missionary of the Free Church of Scotland. While he was living in Louisiana he became, through marriage, the owner

of fifteen slaves of an estimated value of \$9,000. For a time he placed them on a neighboring plantation and gave them the proceeds of their labor but that did not satisfy his conscience and in 1848 he brought them to Canada, thereby automatically giving them their freedom. His effort on their behalf did not end here. Having brought them to this new country, he felt it a duty to look after them, to educate and make of them useful citizens. The same thing, he believed, could be done for others in like circumstance.

The first effort to secure a tract of land for the refugees was made by the Rev. Mr. King as the representative of the Presbyterian Church. This application was before the Executive Council of the Canadian Government in September, 1848, but was not successful. Steps were at once taken to organize a non-sectarian body to deal with the government and this new body took the name of the Elgin Association in honor of the then governor-general of the Canadas who seems to have been well disposed toward the refugees. The Elgin Association was legally incorporated "for the settlement and moral improvement of the colored population of Canada, for the purpose of purchasing crown or clergy reserve lands in the township of Raleigh and settling the same with colored families resident in Canada of approved moral character."¹ Rev. Dr. Connor was the first president; Rev. Dr. Willis, of Knox College, Toronto, first vice-president, and Rev. William King, second vice-president. J. T. Matthews was the secretary, J. S. Howard, treasurer, while the original directors were E. A. T. McCord, Walter McFarland, Peter Freland, Charles Bercsy, W. R. Abbott, John Laidlaw, E. F. Whittesend and James Brown. These are the names that appear upon the petition to the government for lands, the original of which is in the Dominion Archives.

There were difficulties in securing the land. Decided opposition to the whole project made itself manifest in Kent county.² In Chatham, the county town, a meeting of pro-

¹ Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery*, 1856, p. 292.

² Documents in Canadian Archives Department.

test was held. The plans of the Elgin Association were condemned and a resolution was passed setting forth objections to selling any of the public domain "to foreigners, the more so when such persons belong to a different branch of the human family and are black." A vigilance committee was appointed to watch the operations of the Elgin Association while the various township councils interested were requested to advance the necessary funds for carrying on the campaign. That there was some dissent, however, even in Chatham is shown by the fact that one Henry Gouins was allowed to speak in favor of the Association. The vigilance committee soon issued a small pamphlet, made up chiefly of the speeches and resolutions of the public meeting. The name of Edwin Larwill, member of Parliament for the county of Kent, appears as one of those most active in opposition to the settlement plan. Larwill had a record for hostility to the colored people though at election times he was accustomed to parade as their friend. In 1856 he introduced in the House of Assembly a most insulting resolution³ calling for a report from the government on "all negro or colored, male or female quadroon, mulatto, samboes, half breeds or mules, mongrels or conglomerates" in public institutions. Larwill was at once called to account for his action and a resolution was introduced calling upon him to retract.

The opposition of Larwill and his supporters failed to impede the progress of the Association and a tract of about 9000 acres, lying to the south of Chatham and within a mile or two of Lake Erie, was purchased. This was surveyed and divided into small farms of fifty acres each, roads were cut through the dense forest and the first settlers began the arduous work of clearing. The colonists were allowed to take up fifty acres each at a price of \$2.50 per acre, payable in ten annual instalments.⁴ Each settler was bound within a certain period to build a house at least as good as the model house set up by the Association, to provide himself

³ *Toronto Weekly Globe*, January 1, 1858.

⁴ Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery*, 1856, pp. 292-293.

with necessary implements and to proceed with the work of clearing land. The model house after which nearly all the dwellings were copied was 18 by 24 feet, 12 feet in height and with a stoop running the length of the front. Some of the settlers were ambitious enough to build larger and better houses but there were none inferior to the model. The tract of country upon which the settlers were located was an almost unbroken forest. The ground was level, heavily timbered with oak, hickory, beech, elm, etc. Part of the soil was a deep rich black loam. Trees two to four feet in diameter were common and the roads cut through to open up settlement were hardly more than wide lanes. Rev. Mr. King thought that one reason for the colony's success was the fact that so many of the settlers were good axe men. Their industry was remarkable and some of the more industrious paid for their land in five or six years and took up more to clear.⁵

⁵ The slaves who had been freed by Mr. King formed the nucleus of the colony but others came as soon as the land was thrown open. The advances made by this colony during the first years of its existence were remarkable. The third annual report for the year 1852, showed a population of 75 families or 400 inhabitants, with 350 acres of land cleared and 204 acres under cultivation. A year later, the fourth annual report showed 130 families or 520 persons, with 500 acres of land cleared and 135 partially cleared, 415 acres being under cultivation in 1853. The live stock was given as 128 cattle, 15 horses, 30 sheep and 250 hogs. The day school had 112 children enrolled and the Sabbath School 80.

The fifth report, for the year 1854, showed 150 families in the colony or immediately adjoining it, 726 acres of land cleared, 174 acres partially cleared and 577 acres under cultivation. In the year there had been an increase of cleared land amounting to 226 acres and of land under cultivation of 162 acres. The livestock consisted of 150 cattle and oxen, 38 horses, 25 sheep and 700 hogs. The day school had 147 on the roll and the Sabbath School 120. A second day school was opened that year.

The sixth annual report (1855) shows 827 acres of land cleared and fenced and 216 acres chopped and to go under cultivation in 1856. There were 810 acres cultivated that year while the live stock consisted of 190 cattle and oxen, 40 horses, 38 sheep and 600 hogs. The day school had an enrollment of 150. Among the advances of this year was the erection of a saw and grist mill which supplied the colony with lumber and with flour and feed. The building of the saw mill meant added prosperity, for an estimate made in 1854 placed the value of the standing timber at \$127,000.

A representative of the *New York Tribune* visited the colony in 1857 and

There are several contemporary references to the sobriety and morality of the colonists. The *New York Tribune* correspondent in 1857 was able to report that liquor was neither made nor sold in the colony and that drunkenness was unknown. There was no illegitimacy and there had been but one arrest for violation of the Canadian laws in the seven years of the colony's history. Though the Presbyterian church gave special attention to the Buxton colony this did not hinder the growth of other sects, Methodists and Baptists both being numerous, though the best of feeling seems to have prevailed and many who retained their own connection were fairly regular attendants at Mr. King's services.

The *Tribune* article gives an interesting description of the homes. The cabins, though rough and rude, were covered with vines and creepers with bright flowers and vegetable gardens round about. Despite the pioneer conditions there abounded comfort and plenty of plain homemade furniture. Pork, potatoes and green corn were staple items of the menu. Of King's former slaves the *Tribune* reports that three had died, nine were at Buxton, one was married and living in Chatham and two others in Detroit were about to return. The *Tribune* reports on one case as typical of what was being achieved by the colony. A colored man, fourteen years before a slave in Missouri and who had been at Bux-

his description of what he saw was reprinted in the *Toronto Globe* of November 20, 1857. The colony was then seven years old and had a population of about 200 families or 800 souls. More than 1,000 acres had been completely cleared while on 200 acres more the trees had been felled and the land would be put under cultivation the next spring. The acreage under cultivation in the season of 1857 he gives as follows: corn, 354 acres; wheat, 200 acres; oats, 70 acres; potatoes, 80 acres; other crops, 120 acres. The live stock consisted of 200 cows, 80 oxen, 300 hogs, 52 horses and a small number of sheep. The industries included a steam sawmill, a brickyard, pearl ash factory, blacksmith, carpenter and shoe shops as well as a good general store. There were two schools, one male and one female. The latter, which had been open only about a year, taught plain sewing and other domestic subjects. The two schools had a combined enrollment of 140 with average attendance of 58. It was being proposed to require a small payment in order to make the schools self-supporting. The Sabbath school had an enrollment of 112 and an average attendance of 52.—Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery*, pp. 293-297.

ton six years, reported that he had 24 acres out of his plot cleared, fenced and under cultivation. On six acres more the trees were felled. He had paid four installments on his farm, owned a yoke of oxen, a wagon and a mare and two colts. His fourteen-year-old boy was at school and was reading Virgil. In the home, besides bed and bedding, chairs and tables, there was a rocking chair and a large, new safe. Water was brought to the visitor in a clean tumbler, set upon a plate. A neighboring cabin had carpet on the floor and some crude prints on the walls. All the cabins had large brick fireplaces. Rev. Mr. King's own house, built of logs with high steep roof, dormer windows and a porch the whole length, was somewhat larger than the others.⁶

What these people actually accomplished at Buxton amid conditions so different from what they had known in the past is altogether remarkable. Some had known little of farm work before coming to the colony while all of them must have found the Canadian climate something of a hardship even in the summer. Outside of the farm work they showed ability as mechanics and tradesmen. One who visited them in the fifties says:⁷

"The best country tavern in Kent is kept by Mr. West, at Buxton. Mr. T. Stringer is one of the most enterprising tradesmen in the county, and he is a Buxtonian, a colored man. I broke my carriage near there. The woodwork, as well as the iron, was broken. I never had better repairing done to either the woodwork or the ironwork of my carriage, I never had better shoeing than was done to my horses, in Buxton, in Feb., 1852, by a black man, a native of Kentucky—in a word, the work was done after the pattern of Charles Peyton Lucas. They are blessed with able mechanics, good farmers, enterprising men, and women worthy of them and they are training the rising generation to principles such as will give them the best places in the esteem and the service of their countrymen at some day not far distant."

A few years sufficed to remove most of the prejudice

⁶ *The New York Tribune*.

⁷ Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, 1855, p. 214.

that had shown itself in the opposition of the Larwill faction at Chatham at the inception of the colony. When Rev. S. R. Ward visited the colony in the early fifties he found that instead of lowering land values of adjoining property as some had predicted would result from establishing a Negro colony in Kent county, the Buxton settlement had actually raised the value of adjoining farms. The Buxton settlers were spoken of by the white people as good farmers, good customers and good neighbors. There were white children attending the Buxton school and white people in their Sunday church services.

Perhaps no finer testimony to the success of the whole undertaking is recorded than that of Dr. Samuel R. Howe who came to Canada for the Freedmen's Inquiry Committee.

"Buxton is certainly a very interesting place," he wrote. "Sixteen years ago it was a wilderness. Now, good highways are laid out in all directions through the forest, and by their side, standing back 33 feet from the road, are about 200 cottages, all built in the same pattern, all looking neat and comfortable; around each one is a cleared place of several acres which is well cultivated. The fences are in good order, the barns seem well filled, and cattle and horses, and pigs and poultry, abound. There are signs of industry and thrift and comfort everywhere; signs of intemperance, of idleness, of want nowhere. There is no tavern and no groggery; but there is a chapel and a schoolhouse. Most interesting of all are the inhabitants. Twenty years ago most of them were slaves, who owned nothing, not even their children. Now they own themselves; they own their houses and farms; and they have their wives and children about them. They are enfranchised citizens of a government which protects their rights. . . . The present condition of all these colonists as compared with their former one is remarkable. . . . This settlement is a perfect success. Here are men who were bred in slavery, who came here and purchased land at the government price, cleared it, bought their own implements, built their own houses after a model and have supported themselves in all material circumstances and now support their schools in part. . . . I consider that this settlement has done as well

as a white settlement would have done under the same circumstances.”⁸

The Buxton settlement had its part in the John Brown affair. A letter written by John Brown, Jr., from Sandusky, Ohio, August 27, 1859, and addressed to “Friend Henrie,” (Kagi), speaks of men in Hamilton, Chatham, Buxton, etc., suitable for the enterprise.

“At Dr. W’s house (presumably in Hamilton) we formed an association,” he says, “the officers consisting of chairman, treasurer and corresponding secretary, the business of which is to hunt up good workmen and raise the means among themselves to send them forward. . . . No minutes of the organization nor any of its proceedings are or will be preserved in writing. I formed similar associations in Chat—and also at B-x-t-n.”

John Brown, Jr., also speaks of going to Buxton where he found “the man, the leading spirit in that affair.”

“On Thursday night last” said he, “I went with him on foot 12 miles; much of the way through mere paths and sought out in the bush some of the choicest. Had a meeting after ten o’clock at night in his house. His wife is a heroine and he will be on hand as soon as his family can be provided for.”⁹

Such is the earlier history of the experiment in Canada of taking bondmen and placing before them the opportunity not alone to make a living in freedom but also to rise in the social scale. How well these people took advantage of their opportunity is shown not only by the material progress they made but by the fact that they gained for themselves the respect of their white neighbors, a respect that continues today for their many descendants who still comprise the Buxton community in Kent county, Ontario.

FRED LANDON

PUBLIC LIBRARIAN, LONDON, CANADA, AND LECTURER IN AMERICAN HISTORY IN WESTERN UNIVERSITY, LONDON.

⁸ Howe, *Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 1864, pp. 70-71.

⁹ *Toronto Weekly Globe*, November 4, 1859.